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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000714

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL ET
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: MELES WILLING TO RE-LEGALIZE OPPOSITION
CUD

Classified By: Charge Janet Wilgus for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PM Meles says he no longer sees any reason why the CUD, whose leaders remain in jail, cannot re-register as a legal party. Party leaders at liberty are trying to overcome both internal differences and obscure legal obstacles to reconstitute Ethiopia's largest opposition political organization. Some of them are simultaneously struggling to meet legal requirements for taking over the government of Addis Ababa. The two issues are linked, since many elected City Council members remain reluctant to govern unless they can do so as the CUD. The City Council's organizing committee has so far persuaded 60 council members-elect to formally register with the National Electoral Board -- still 9 short of quorum. The committee claims that members-elect continue to face threats and intimidation not from the government, but from hard-line opponents of the GOE, probably with support from the Diaspora. City Council leaders are seeking a meeting with PM Meles' to remove legal obstacles to reforming the CUD; donor country diplomats will try to facilitate a meeting and solutions. EU Commissioner Louis Michel is in direct contact with Meles and CUD leaders in and out of jail. While the Commission has until recently focused almost exclusively on freeing jailed CUD leaders, pressure from EU member states and Secretary Rice have reportedly persuaded Michel to support CUD participation in City Council and other efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and reduce tensions.
End Summary.

Meles Gives Ground on Legalizing CUD

2 (C) In a meeting with Charge Huddleston March 3, Prime Minister Meles said that he no longer saw any reason why the National Electoral Board (NEB) could not register the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) as a legal political party. The PM said that he had discussed the matter with Kemal Bedri, the president of the NEB, who had confirmed this view. There were two ways in which CUD supporters could pursue this matter, Meles said: 1) reconstitute the merger of parties that the NEB had rejected in the fall of 2005; or 2) registering a new party of the same name "from scratch" based on the submission of the necessary 1,500 signatures. The PM remarked that he found the second to be the better option, since the component parties of the CUD were under criminal indictment and would likely be convicted and banned by the courts eventually. He nonetheless maintained that either option appeared legal for the moment.

Initial Approach on Merger Runs into Roadblocks

13. (C) During the week of March 6, CUD leaders, led by City Council Organizing Committee chair Ayele Chamiso, submitted a package documents to the NEB in an effort to register the merger of the CUDP according to option 1 above. Ayele told a group of Western ambassadors and Pol/Econ Counselor March 8 that the NEB had promised to reply formally within a few days, but had informally indicated to the applicants that their submission lacked official party seals and letterhead. Ayele reminded diplomats that the whereabouts of party seals and other official documents were unknown since of security forces' closure of party offices and seizure of their contents in the wake of November unrest. When asked about option two of collecting signatures for a new party registration, Ayele expressed concerns about losing rights to the property of component parties when that property is eventually released by the judicial system. Pol/Econ Counselor urged the group to remain flexible about how to register the party and suggested that property issues could be resolved separately at a later date. In a private conversation after the meeting, Ayele said he preferred the option of a fresh registration over a merger, but had not yet convinced others in his group that this was the way to go.

City Council to Appeal for Help from Meles

14. (C) Ayele and the organizing committee asked diplomats for assistance in removing GOE roadblocks to the CUD's re-establishment; progress in this area would facilitate achieving official quorum for taking over Addis Ababa, they added. Specifically, the group asked that donor governments (including the USG) seek the PM's agreement to:

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-- Reopen CUD and component party offices and return key documents and seals;
-- Extend the deadline for achieving quorum on City Council another week beyond March 10;
-- Accept a lower number as quorum, such as 55, rather than the current 69, since no more than 107 council members elect were in Ethiopia and at liberty;
-- Release 14 council members-elect who had been arrested since November but not charged; (Two had recently been freed.)
-- Meet face to face with the City Council organizing committee to resolve institutional obstacles to taking power in Addis.

15. (C) EU Amb. Tim Clarke replied that the group's requests were more than reasonable. He suggested that Ayele write a letter to the Prime Minister conveying the requests, to which diplomats could then offer their support. Ayele agreed to do so. Others agreed to advocate with Meles.

Hard-line Pressure Delays City Council Quorum

16. (C) Ayele told diplomats that his committee had so far persuaded 60 council members-elect to formally register with the NEB. Others who had earlier signed a petition agreeing to take office were holding back. Some had apparently changed their minds, but new individuals might also come forward. According to Ayele, petition signatories had received threatening phone calls and other pressure to abandon their commitment to take office. Ayele did not say specifically where the calls came from, but acknowledged that Diaspora activists and other opposition hard-liners were probably responsible. Ayele reiterated that regaining access to CUD offices as well as re-registering the party would be a huge boost to the effort of his organizing committee. Pol/Econ Counselor replied that although diplomats were fully

prepared to support his committee's requests to Meles, the group should not simply wait for more help from the GOE. Instead, it should continue persuading its own members-elect to register at the NEB. The group's success in collecting 70 signatures had likely been a key factor in convincing the PM that there was a critical mass of responsible CUD leaders with which to work, he added. Ayele and the group agreed to continue their efforts to achieve quorum while they simultaneously sought a more conducive environment through the Prime Minister.

EU Diplomacy Contentious and Intense

¶7. (C) Following the March 8 meeting with City Council representatives, Austrian Amb. Brigitte Oppinger-Walchsofer (strictly protect) told Pol/Econ Counselor that EU member states had struggled with the Commission to redirect the latter's intense diplomatic efforts on Ethiopia's internal political crisis. EU Commissioner Louis Michel and local Amb. Tim Clarke had both been working with imprisoned leader Berhanu Nega against the initiative to take over the City Council, she said. After a strong push from local EU heads of mission as well as a phone call with Secretary Rice, however, Michel had reluctantly agreed to support the City Council Organizing Committee's efforts. Michel had been making phone calls to key CUD leaders in recent days, and had even talked by phone with Berhanu Nega in prison, as well as with PM Meles. The EU had released \$150 million in frozen aid to Ethiopia following Meles' agreement to provide access to the CUD prisoners for Michel in late February, Oppinger-Walchsofer said, but was still holding over \$300 million in coveted assistance for transportation projects. The Austrian Ambassador was pleased that Michel had appeared to accept member state views, but remained wary of what messages the Commission might be sending in private.

Comment: Legalization of CUD Would Mark Major Step Forward

¶8. (C) While technical obstacles remain to the re-establishment of the CUD, Ethiopia's most popular opposition movement, PM Meles' agreement in principle is a positive and surprising sea change from his early positions. A legal CUD would dramatically improve the image of Ethiopia's democratic institutions in the eyes of the public and international donors, and would help cool simmering

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popular discontent in Addis Ababa. The emergence of moderate, pragmatic CUD leaders in both Parliament and among City Council-members elect may well be a factor in Meles' change of heart, as well as donor pressure and the dearth of other viable options for running the nation's capital. Post will work with EU missions and others to facilitate solutions to remaining legal barriers to re-registration of the CUD through the Prime Minister, urging him to make good on his commitment to "go the extra mile" in support of the City Council organizing committee. At the same time, we will push the committee itself to show that it has the political will and capacity to succeed even in the current environment. Continued Department and USEU efforts to keep EU Commissioner Michel rowing in the same direction would also be helpful.

HUDDLESTON